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Accreditation standards for correctional programs

Research summary
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Question

How can you tell whether a correctional program is likely to reduce reoffending?

Background

Outcome studies of correctional programs have yielded mixed results. Some programs appear to reduce recidivism, other programs have no effect, and some programs seem to make offenders worse. Outcome evaluations are useful for determining the effectiveness of established programs, but cannot be used to evaluate new programs. One way to evaluate new programs is through accreditation standards.

In the early 1990s, Her Majesty's Prison Service (England and Wales) convened an international panel of experts to translate the features of proven effective programs into accreditation standards. These standards were then used in the development of diverse corrections programs, including programs for sex offenders, substance abusers, and generally violent offenders. Other jurisdictions, including the Correctional Service of Canada, subsequently adopted similar accreditation standards.

Method

Information about international accreditation standards was gathered from written materials as well as direct participation in several review panels for sexual offender programs in the UK and Canada.

Answer

The accreditation criteria used in the UK and Canada are similar, although they continue to evolve. The following eight criteria are from the most recent version used by CSC.

Programs are most likely to be effective when there is an explicit explanation of why the program should work, and this explanation is supported by research (Criterion 1). Effective programs target problems directly linked with offending (Criterion 2). The methods used for delivering the programs have been demonstrated to be effective (Criterion 3), which, in most cases would involve teaching offenders new skills (Criterion 4). Effective programs fit the learning styles and abilities of the offenders (Criterion 5). Not surprisingly, effective programs are of sufficient intensity and duration to address the problems typical of the program participants (Criterion 6). As well, effective programs include provisions for follow-up care in the community (Criterion 7). The

final criterion is that effective programs need to be continuously monitored and evaluated to ensure integrity (Criterion 8). It is important to know whether the offenders are changing as intended, and whether the program is being delivered as intended.

Preparing programs for accreditation is difficult, and most programs do not receive full endorsement the first time they are presented to the accreditation panel. In many case, however, program staff are able to use the direction provided to develop programs that are considered high-quality by all concerned ¾ international panelists, treatment providers, and correctional managers.

Policy implications

- The accreditation process can be an effective tool for promoting high quality correctional programs.
- Even without going through the formal accreditation process, the criteria can be a useful guide for treatment providers wishing to monitor and improve their interventions.
- Researchers conducting outcome evaluations of specific programs should first consider whether, based on the accreditation criteria, the program would be expected to reduced recidivism.

Source

- Hanson, R. K., & Yates, P. M. (2004). Sexual violence: Risk factors and treatment. In M. Eliasson (Ed.), *Anthology on interventions against violent men* (pp. 151-166). Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Uppsalla Women's Studies B: Women in the Humanities: 3. Uppsala , Sweden: Uppsala Universitet.

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